



La Vista Ecological Learning Center

A ministry of the
Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate

E-News and Earth Spirituality Calendar November, 2023

Maxine Pohlman, SSND
Email: info@lavistaelc.org
Website: lavistaelc.org

Monthly reflections are archived
in the [Blog](#) on our web site.

November - Oaks' Old Holy Ways



Last month was *Oaktober* in Illinois, a time for celebrating the beauty and importance of oaks, our state tree. Although there are many kinds of oaks to honor at La Vista, there is a particularly spectacular white oak I want to hold up. It is pictured here, standing proudly at the entrance to the bluff pasture. Over the years I have developed a relationship with it, holding workshops in its shade and using its girth to figure its age which is about 150 years.

This old oak calls to mind Mary Oliver's poem "[The Trees](#)" which begins with the question, "Do you think of them as decoration?" I went beyond that idea when I read [Douglas Tallamy's book The Nature of Oaks: The Rich Ecology of Our Most Essential Native Trees](#).

He believes it is our ignorance of natural history that allows us to treat Earth as if it doesn't matter: "We don't care because we

don't know how important it is." I believe Mary Oliver would agree, for she writes, "Oh, Lord, how we are all for invention and advancement! I think it would do us good if we'd think about these brothers and sisters quietly and deeply."

Tallamy is a master at this kind of deep thinking, and he shows clearly that the *old ways* of oaks are BEST at doing what Earth needs so much right now:

- **supporting a food web** so other living things can exist there. No other plant genus supports as much life as the oak, thus promoting biodiversity.
- **sequestering carbon** for long-term storage. Oaks are the plants with the biggest root system, and so they do this to the hilt, countering climate change.
- **managing the watershed**. Oaks' big canopies disperse the rain, and their massive roots absorb the water, avoiding runoff and reducing nutrient loss.

This list could go on and on, proving oak trees are much more than decoration. Later in the poem Mary Oliver asks, "May I invite you to revise your thoughts about them?" I hope this brief list deepened your appreciation as it did mine and encouraged you to learn more about them, plant them, request them at nurseries and create a demand, remove invasive species so oak seedlings have a chance to thrive, and/or support those who care about oaks in our back yards, towns, and cities.

Finally, Oliver honors all trees as she concludes by using the phrase that captured my heart: "The trees, the trees, just holding on to the *old, holy ways*." Is she intimating that this is what holiness must include in our challenged times, aligning with the old holy ways of creation? Surely this is an important way to care for our common home!

(On a final note, watch this brief video and learn about the [Laudato Tree](#) initiative in Washington, DC, and how the Oblates are taking part.)
Photo by Sister Maxine

Report: October Field Trip with OMI Novices

On October 6th our field trip theme Ecological Conversion led us to our nearest neighbor, [The Nature Institute \(TNI\)](#). The Institute does some of the work encouraged by *Laudato Si* by preserving of hundreds of wooded acres and converting previously mowed lawn into native prairies.



Land preservation and restoration are types of ecological conversion, and it is heartening to know that our efforts at the Novitiate are extended by the work of our neighbor. Just as the encyclical is addressed to “all people on our planet”, we network with many groups in our bioregion. This kind of networking is also ecological conversion, as we resist isolation and reach across boundaries to unite in our efforts to truly care for our common home.

Photo by Sister Maxine. L to R: Jesse Lopez, Elisha Chisanga, TNI Director Angie Moan, Chandu Pnugumai, Alvaro Zapata, Robby Mukangwa

November 8 and 15 Online Book Discussion Continues: Explaining Life Through Evolution by Prosanta Chakrabarty

Our study group often notes phrases we can easily remember as we refine our understanding of evolution, and one of these is “Big Birth”. Author Chakrabarty explains, “Think of the origin of life as the “Big Birth,” like the Big Bang that formed our universe, except with life radiating out from that center (the first living thing, or last common ancestor of all living things), and with us and every other living species on the outer edge.”

Why is it important to learn this? Chakrabarty notes that many people too easily revert to a linear view of evolution with us humans at the end and everything else behind us, thus seeing all other living things besides us as “subordinate precursors leading to humans.” He explains that this kind of linear thinking results in both a poor understanding of evolution as well as a distorted sense of ourselves. He explains, “The misguided linear view of life – this false hierarchy - ...is insidious and, in its worst form, leads to racism, classism, sexism... and all manner of pernicious prejudices.” Our study group feels grateful to this author who has given us plain language for our education.

**November 7, 21, 28: Workdays in La Vista’s Pollinator Garden
9:30 - 11:30 am**

**November 14: Workday in the Woods Nature Preserve
9:30 - 11:30 am**

November 23: Thanksgiving

How wonderful to have a holiday which seems more like a holy day as we take time to extend gratitude to one another, to our rare and precious planet Earth, and to the Great Mystery imbuing all with life! My heart is full as I think of all the volunteers who care for this lovely part of “our common home”:



- the men and women who have been working in the Missionary Oblates Woods Nature Preserve so faithfully since 2009,
- volunteers who have created and tended the Pollinator Garden since 2014,
- the [Volunteer Stewardship Network](#) which provides tools for our work through generous grants,
- one volunteer who has chosen to weed and care for Our Lady of La Vista Grotto, pictured here,
- the Novitiate groundskeeper who keeps us supplied with wood chips for the pollinator garden.

I also extend my thanks to you, faithful readers, for spending some of your precious time on Earth with us. And to those who send a comment, suggestion, or a name to add to our mail list - a special thanks to

you! May all be abundantly blessed!

Photo by Sister Maxine



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